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The Munhak Tongne Phenomenon: The Publication of Literary Fiction in South Korea Today

Bruce Fulton

In this essay I outline some of the profound ways in which the literary culture of South Korea has changed since the mid-1990s, particularly with respect to the publication of literary fiction. I discuss four prominent publishers of literary fiction in South Korea. I argue that among these four publishers, Munhak Tongne has spearheaded a movement toward a more reader-friendly posture among publishers of literary fiction. I suggest in conclusion that Munhak Tongne has established a paradigm for the publication of literary fiction in South Korea in the new millennium.

Introduction

Literature in modern Korea has on the whole been a decidedly serious undertaking, guided in South Korea by a hierarchical, conservative, and overwhelmingly male literary establishment of scholars and literary critics (often one and the same) who have tended to prize historical consciousness, social relevance, and political correctness in both poetry and prose. Humor apart from satire is in comparatively short supply and imagination is constrained in the service of a felt obligation by fiction writers to bear witness in their writing to the many upheavals that have characterized Korea's modern history. The new millennium, however, has brought a watershed change to this literary culture, due in large part to the ascendance of the Munhak Tongne publishing house in Seoul. Since its creation in the mid-1990s Munhak Tongne has been a magnet for young writers and has supplanted Ch'angjak kwa Pip'yŏng Sa (Creation and Criticism Publishing Company) as the most successful publisher of literary fiction in South Korea. The public image of Munhak Tongne is the smiling face of a writer in his or her 30s or 40s (men and women are represented almost equally in the top ranks of the Munhak Tongne list of literary fiction), colorful book covers, and imaginative works of literature. At a time when some literary critics are bemoaning the "death of literature" in Korea, the future of Korean fiction would seem increasingly to lie in the hands of Munhak Tongne writers such as Kim Yŏng-ha. In this essay I outline some of the profound ways in which

the literary culture of South Korea has changed since the mid-1990s, particularly with respect to the publication of literary fiction.

Historical Context

When I first began reading Korean literary fiction, in the early 1980s, I had to learn not only a new language but also a new literary culture. With respect to graphic design, most of the volumes of fiction read from back to front, the type page from top to bottom and right to left. The titles and authors' names usually appeared in Chinese, the covers were monochrome or had one color at best, and the production values were more functional than creative. Photos of authors were in black and white, and most of the faces wore stony expressions. *My, how serious modern Korean literature is!* I used to think. Thirty years later Korean literary fiction is packaged much more attractively. The book design is more reader-friendly: there are colorful covers, creative design, more "white space" (the type is less tightly packed onto the page), color photos of smiling authors, and very little Chinese. And in the case of Munhak Tongne, even the name of the company itself ("literature community") is inviting. Much of the most interesting Korean fiction, and many of the most engaging of contemporary Korean fiction writers, are published by Munhak Tongne. How did this change in the culture of South Korean literary fiction come about?

In the early 1980s the publication of literary fiction in South Korea was dominated by a trio of publishers—Munhak kwa Chisǒng Sa (Literature and Intellect Publishing Company), Minŭm Sa (The People's Voice Publishing Company), and the aforementioned Ch'angjak kwa Pip'yǒng Sa. The first of these three, familiarly known as Munji, has published several classic fiction writers including:

- Hwang Sun-wǒn, the most accomplished writer of short fiction in modern Korea,
- Ch'oe In-hun, like Hwang a native northerner, and one of the most intertextual of modern Korean writers,
- Cho Se-hŭi, whose linked-story novel *The Dwarf* (Nanjangi ka ssoaollin chagŭn kong, 1978) was issued in almost 200 printings and is arguably the most important one-volume Korean novel since 1945,

- Ch'ong-hŭi, a masterful writer of short fiction who with Pak Wan-sŏ deserves major credit for the breakthrough by women fiction writers in the 1970s, and
- Ch'oe Yun, one of the most versatile and sophisticated of contemporary writers.

The publisher Minŭm Sa, in its 22-volume Today's Writers series (Onŭl ŭi chakka ch'ongsŏ). published from 1981 to 1986, solidified the reputations of an entire generation of writers, especially Yi Mun-yŏl. In 1985, Kwŏn Yŏng-min (Kwon Youngmin), a professor of modern Korean literature at Seoul National University who had just returned from a year of teaching at Harvard, edited a four-volume anthology of fiction, poetry, and criticism, *Forty Years of Post-Liberation Korean Literature* (Haebang hu 40nyŏn ŭi munhak), bringing together the best of Korean literature published after the nation's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. The two volumes of fiction included therein gave birth to one of the first readily available anthologies of post-1945 Korean short fiction in English translation, *Land of Exile*.¹ *A Room in the Woods* (Sup sog ŭi pang, 1986), a fiction collection by Kang Sŏk-kyŏng, was Minŭm Sa's best-selling volume of literary fiction until 1989; the title story became the centerpiece of the longest-lived volume of modern Korean fiction in English translation to date, *Words of Farewell*.² One of the most distinctive of the Minŭm Sa authors is the fiction writer known in English as Hailji, who is virtually unique in the contemporary South Korean literary world for having published only novels and never a short story. (The short story has always been the fiction genre of choice in modern Korea as well as the avenue to formal debut on the Korean literary stage.)

The third publisher, Ch'angjak kwa Pip'yŏng Sa, or Ch'angbi for short, has long been among the most political of the South Korean publishing houses, its editorial board frequently challenging the authoritarian regimes that ruled South Korea until the democratization of the political process in 1987. One of its leading authors, Hwang Sŏg-yŏng (published in English as Hwang Sok-yong), was jailed for five years after a highly publicized visit to North Korea (illegal under South Korea's national security laws), but emerged to publish a series of novels that have earned him an international reputation. Ch'angbi has been especially strong in its publications of literary criticism and has consistently published fiction that critiques contemporary South Korean society and history.

Like Munhak Tongne, each of these houses publishes a literary journal. Munji published the quarterly *Literature and Intellect* (Munhak kwa chisöng) in 40 issues from 1970 to 1980, at which point it was closed down by the Chun Doo Hwan regime.³ The prime movers behind both the publishing house and the journal were four men: the influential but short-lived scholar and critic Kim Hyön; Kim Pyöng-ik; Kim Chu-yön, a scholar of German literature who in 2008 became President of the Korea Literature Translation Institute; and Kim Ch'i-su, like Kim Hyön a scholar of French as well as Korean literature. Minum Sa launched *World Literature* (Segye üi munhak) in the autumn of 1976. To the usual offering of Korean short fiction, poetry, criticism, and book reviews, this journal adds features on international writers. Ch'angbi publishes the journal *Creation and Criticism* (Ch'angjak kwa pip'yöng). Readers are more likely to see political commentary in this journal than in the others, as befits the broad intellectual spectrum and the dissident constituency of the Ch'angbi readership.

The Emergence of *Munhak Tongne*

The emergence of the Munhak Tongne publishing house, and its quarterly journal of the same name, coincided with the emergence of a new generation of women fiction writers in the mid-1990s including Ŭn Hui-gyöng, Shin Kyöng-suk, Kong Chi-yöng, Kong Sön-ok, Cho Kyöng-nan (Kyung Ran Jo), Ha Söng-nan, Kim In-suk, Han Kang, Yi Hye-gyöng, and Sö Hajin. Several of these authors, and the first two in particular, became mainstays at Munhak Tongne and its literary journal. Munhak Tongne's most immediate contribution to literary fiction in South Korea, then, was to help rectify a long-standing gender imbalance among fiction writers. There were, to be sure, women writers of note from the 1910s on, but it could be argued that it was not until the 1970s and the emergence of writers O Chöng-hui and Pak Wan-sö that women fiction writers began to be evaluated primarily for their literary accomplishments and were liberated from the stereotype (applied more explicitly to their sisters who wrote poetry) of the delicate, lyrical, sentimental woman writer. The accomplishments of this new generation of women fiction writers—literary prizes, critical as well as popular esteem, greater representation in translation—are increasingly visible in the new millennium.

This is not to say that Munhak Tongne eschewed male writers. To the contrary, some of the most distinctive contemporary voices among the men have been published there as well, writers such as Kim Yŏng-ha, Pak Min-gyu, Kim Yŏn-su, and Kim Chung-hyŏk. Kim Yŏng-ha (published in English translation as Young-Ha Kim) is one of the first Korean writers to have landed a contract with a major American commercial publisher (Harcourt).

In the new millennium Munhak Tongne began to attract senior writers as well, such as Hwang Sŏg-yŏng and Cho Chŏng-nae. The signing of these two authors was evidence of the weakening of the tendency for fiction writers to remain with the same publishing house over their career, a development presumably owing to the benefits of publication with Munhak Tongne. What are those benefits? According to a prominent writer, scholar, and translator, the Munhak Tongne editors are very sensitive to the needs of a mass readership.⁴ One indication of this concern is that Munhak Tongne now enjoys more sales from translations of foreign literature than from domestic literature.⁵ Second, Munhak Tongne has access to a well-developed network of literary critics.⁶ This is especially important for the writer of short fiction (and volumes of literary fiction published by Munhak Tongne in recent years appear almost evenly divided between novels and short-story collections). As author Kong Chi-yŏng (published in English translation as Gong Jiyoung) asks rhetorically in a discussion of the merits of concentrating on short fiction versus novels, "Isn't it easier to write a 25-page story that will appeal to critics the writer already knows, than to spend years writing a novel that will be evaluated by readers as yet unknown?"⁷

The literary critics who founded Munhak Tongne were for the most part of a younger generation than the members of the editorial boards at the other publishers of literary fiction. According to one of Munhak Tongne's flagship authors, some of the founders mortgaged their homes in order to accumulate the necessary startup funds.⁸ As a result, one of the first tasks of the new publishers was to recoup their investment.⁹ This meant that early on, Munhak Tongne was compelled to adopt a commercially feasible publishing strategy. This they accomplished by publishing not only literary fiction but children's fiction and translated works. They also had the good fortune to publish two writers who were just entering the spotlight of the Korean literary world, Shin Kyŏng-suk and Ŭn Hŭi-gyŏng. Shin attracted attention for her lyrical style and for her autobiographical stories of young women from the countryside who, like she

herself, took the unusual route (for a creative writer) of going from high school to factory work (instead of entering university). Ŭn brought to her fiction a gently cynical world-view that contrasted with the sentimentality often attributed to the writing of earlier generations of Korean women fiction writers.

Another benefit for authors publishing with Munhak Tongne is that they are not contractually compelled to publish with that company for the rest of their career. Most of the older Munhak Tongne writers, and several of the younger ones, first published elsewhere, and several have subsequently published with other houses. Shin Kyöng-suk's 2008 novel *Please Look After Mom* (Ömma rül put'akhae), scheduled for publication by the American publishing giant Knopf in April 2011, was originally issued by the Ch'angbi house. All of which is evidence of the opening, spearheaded by Munhak Tongne, of the South Korean literary fiction publishing industry.

For many writers, a primary attraction of Munhak Tongne seems to be the opportunity to publish highly imaginative works of fiction that do not necessarily conform to the tried-and-true criteria (in the eyes of the literary establishment) of social relevance and acknowledgment of modern Korea's conflicted history. When Kim Yöng-ha published *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* (Na nün na rül p'agoehal kwölli ka itta) in 1996, readers were taken with the novel's frank treatment of casual sex and assisted suicide—topics rarely appearing in literary fiction until then. Narrative style has become more freewheeling, with authors such as Yun Söng-hüi writing stories in long paragraphs containing multiple speakers and narrative points of view. An already strong tradition of intertextuality has been continued by Munhak Tongne's publication of Hwang Sög-yöng's eponymously named *Shim Ch'öng* (2003), based on traditional Korea's exemplar of female filial piety. Diaspora literature, significant because of the paucity of fully developed foreign characters in modern Korean fiction, appears in Kim Yöng-ha's *Black Flowers* (Kömün kkot, 2003) and Ch'ön Un-yöng's *Farewell, Circus* (Chal kara sök'ösü, 2005).

What may ultimately be most influential about the literary fiction published by Munhak Tongne is that the trends just noticed are appearing with increasing regularity among the book lists of its competitors, especially Munji and Ch'angbi. At least two novels concerned with the torture apparatus of authoritarian South Korean regimes have been published by Ch'angbi: Hyön Ki-yöng's *Nuran* (2009) and Ch'ön Un-yöng's *Ginger* (Saenggang, 2011). Also from Ch'angbi is Hwang

Sŏg-yŏng's novel *The Abandoned Princess* (Paridegi, 2007), which has both diaspora and intertextual elements (the protagonist is based on the prototype of the female-centered tradition of native Korean spirituality). Munji has published two of the most surreal collections of short fiction in recent years, P'yŏn Hye-yŏng's *Aoi Gardens* (Aoi kadŏn, 2005) and Kim Sum's *Bed* (Ch'imdae, 2007). And from Minŭm Sa comes an allegorical novel of a lost homeland and culture, set in Lithuania and featuring characters who speak only Lithuanian or English, *The Užupis Republic* (Ujup'isŭ konghwaguk, 2009), by the previously mentioned Hailji.

Conclusion

The South Korean publishing world has become increasingly volatile since the IMF disruptions of the mid-1990s (at which time several literary journals either ceased publication or changed from monthly to quarterly publication), and publishers of literary fiction today increasingly face the challenge of a young readership that is drawn more to the visual image than the printed page.¹⁰ It remains to be seen if Munhak Tongne, a relative newcomer in the publication of literary fiction in South Korea, will achieve the longevity evinced by competitors such as Munji and Ch'angbi. But if commercial success, a fluid stable of authors, a reader-friendly culture, and imaginative fiction are any indication of future success, then it would appear that Munhak Tongne has positioned itself for the new millennium as well as any South Korean publisher of literary fiction.¹¹

Notes

¹*Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction*. (1993). (M. R. Pihl & B. & J.-C. Fulton, Trans.). Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe. A revised edition, in which the original 12 stories were augmented by 4 more recent stories, was issued in 2007.

²*Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers*. (1989). (B. & J.-C. Fulton, Trans.). Seattle: Seal Press. This volume is still in print.

³See Kwŏn Y. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Modern Korean Literature* (Han'guk hyŏndae munhak taesajŏn), 302. Seoul: Seoul National University Press. This reference contains not only a list of every volume of literary fiction published in Korea since 1907 but similar lists of poetry collections and literary criticism.

⁴Ch'oe Yun, in-person interview with author, Seoul, Korea, August 2, 2009.

⁵Sales figures provided by the Korean Publishers Association indicate that translations of foreign literature regularly appear on bestseller lists in South Korea. See, for example, "What We're Reading," *List: Books from Korea* 8 (Summer 2010), 10.

- ⁶Ch'oe Yun, in-person interview with author, Seoul, Korea, August 2, 2009.
- ⁷Gong Jiyoung, electronic interview with Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton and Soohyun Chang, *Azalea* 4 (2010): in press.
- ⁸Kim Yŏng-ha, in-person interview with author, Vancouver, Canada, November 3, 2008.
- ⁹Ch'oe Yun, in-person interview with author, Seoul, Korea, August 2, 2009.
- ¹⁰"In 2005 it was reported that South Koreans read the least (only about three hours a week to Americans' six) among the 30 nations whose consumer habits were surveyed by a consultancy. See 'Indians "world's biggest readers. BBC News, June 27, 2005.'"—B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—And Why It Matters* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010), p. 89, sidebar note. This note refers to what appears to be a declining readership in North Korea as well as in South Korea.
- ¹¹Evidence for the potential for global appeal by Munhak Tongne writers (defined as authors who have published at least one book of literary fiction with Munhak Tongne) can be seen in the following book-length publications in 2009 alone: a Dutch translation of Hwang Sŏg-yŏng's novel *Mugi ūi kūnŭl* (In the Shadow of Arms), a German translation of a selection of short fiction by Sŏng Sŏk-je; French translations of a selection of short fiction by Ŭn Hŭi-gyŏng and of Hwang Sŏg-yŏng's previously mentioned *Shim Ch'ŏng*; a Polish translation of a selection of short fiction by Kim Yŏng-ha; and a Chinese translation of Ha Sŏng-nan's novel *Sapporo yŏinsuk* (Sapporo Inn). Data from *LTI Korea Annual Report 2009* (Seoul: Korea Literature Translation Institute, 2009), pp. 69-77.

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